



3-1-2004

Rethinking Validity in Qualitative Research from a Social Constructionist Perspective: From Is this Valid Research? To What Is this Research Valid for?

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Recommended APA Citation

Aguinaldo, J. P. (2004). Rethinking Validity in Qualitative Research from a Social Constructionist Perspective: From Is this Valid Research? To What Is this Research Valid for?. *The Qualitative Report*, 9(1), 127-136. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol9/iss1/8>

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Rethinking Validity in Qualitative Research from a Social Constructionist Perspective: From Is this Valid Research? To What Is this Research Valid for?

Abstract

This article theorizes the issue of validity that is premised upon social constructionist assumptions, particularly as it is applied to the assessment of qualitative research. As a social construction, validity must thus be interrogated for its discursive function within the social sciences. I will argue that, as a criterion of assessment, validity polices the social science enterprise and thus, functions as a practice of power through the de/legitimation of social knowledge, research practice, and experiential possibilities. This critique will lead into a reformulation of validity that actively recognizes and negotiates its practice of power. Within this reformulation, research findings are conceptualized as representations and should be scrutinized for their realist, critical, deconstructive, and reflexive narrative function. Put simply, assessing qualitative research entails multiple and contradictory readings of its representational failures and successes. Therefore, validity is no longer conceived as a determination (i.e., is valid versus is not valid) but a continual process of interrogation. This new framework will be applied to my Masters thesis research that explored domestic violence and relationship abuse among gay males. Implications for research practice are discussed.

Keywords

Qualitative Methodology, Validity, Social Constructionism, Gay Male Partner Abuse

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Rethinking Validity in Qualitative Research from a Social Constructionist Perspective: From “Is this valid research?” to “What is this research valid for?”

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This article theorizes the issue of validity from a social constructionist perspective, particularly as it is applied to the assessment of qualitative research. Validity must be interrogated for its discursive function within the social sciences. I will argue that, as a criterion of assessment, validity polices the social science enterprise and thus, functions as a practice of power through the de/legitimation of social knowledge, research practice, and experiential possibilities. This critique will lead into a reformulation of validity that actively recognizes and negotiates its practice of power. Within this reformulation, research findings are conceptualized as representations and should be scrutinized for their realist, critical, deconstructive, and reflexive narrative function. Put simply, assessing qualitative research entails multiple and contradictory readings of its representational failures and successes. Therefore, validity of research is no longer conceived as a determination (i.e., “is valid” versus “is not valid”) but a continual process of interrogation. This new framework will be applied to my Master’s thesis research that explored domestic violence and relationship abuse among gay males. Implications for research practice are discussed. Key words: Qualitative Methodology, Validity, Social Constructionism, and Gay Male Partner Abuse

It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to shirk the issue of validity in their research write-ups. I have done so in my own work, not to evade the issue necessarily, but as a means to dodge the long and extraordinarily tiresome task of unpacking positivist assumptions to which my own notion of validity runs contrary. However, by doing so, I often fell prey to proceeding along the research path armed with only an inarticulate, half-understood, and sometimes vague notion that addressed dismissively the concerns that validity purports to resolve. The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore one way of conceptualizing and assessing validity through a social constructionist lens as it is applied to qualitative research. Of course, defining social constructionism is itself problematic and to do so is to be swayed by the very assumptions that social constructionism opposes. Definition renders it fixed and stable and elides variation among its own constructions. This amounts to nothing more than, as Potter (1996) claims, a realist account of constructionism.

For the moment, I forego this divisive discussion and instead state simply that “social constructionism” invoked here encompasses a range of epistemologies that are in opposition to positivist assumptions, which dominate the research landscape. According to positivism, research is valid to the extent that its findings offer access to an objective social reality. A host of research methods are used to achieve these criteria. Within qualitative methodology positivist researchers put forth, for example, “triangulation” of data sources, data analysts, and theory as a method of reducing “systematic bias” thereby increasing the validity of the findings from a qualitative study (Patton, 1990; Patton, 1999). Although qualitative researchers working within positivist assumptions may not necessarily use the term “validity” to denote their methods of assessment, they nonetheless utilize terms parallel to those of traditional quantitative research designs (Sparkes, 2001). Assessing qualitative research through a social constructionist lens, however, is premised upon the belief that research findings are always already partial and situated; that they actively construct the social world which is itself an interpretation and in need of interpretation. If we reject the very notion of an empirical world untouched by the social and the political, how are we to assess the research claims we make? If we concede that “truth” and “objective knowledge” cannot be invoked unproblematically, upon what grounds are we to say one research claim is better (i.e., valid) than another?

This paper takes as its starting point the work of rhetoricians in the human sciences (e.g., Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987; Simons, 1989), discursive psychologists (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and sociologists of science (e.g., Gilbert & Mulkay, 1982, 1984; Mulkay & Gilbert, 1983) that has demonstrated the rhetorical nature of scientific research and the empirical claims they make. In this work, it is argued that scientists have at their disposal a number of linguistic repertoires and discursive strategies, institutionalized within the conventions of scientific writing, to assert their research claims as “fact” and to subvert the (lay and scientific) claims of others. In this sense, validity is a rhetorical organisation of (scientific) arguments. It is a feat of persuasion – and therefore, a social construction (Kvale, 1996; Sparkes, 2001). As such, it must be interrogated for its discursive function within the social science enterprise. In this paper, I will argue that as a criterion of assessment validity polices the social sciences and operates as a form of power that is practised through its capacity to de/legitimize social knowledge, research practice, and experiential possibilities. This interrogation will lead into a reformulation of validity, one that recognizes and negotiates power and makes its practices known. This new framework will be applied concretely to the evaluation of my Master’s thesis research that explored domestic violence and relationship abuse among gay males.

The Theory

Until now, my thinking about validity had rested upon the assumption that qualitative (or quantitative) research is valid to the extent that it can further some intended objective. In this sense, research conclusions are not assessed by their proximity to the truth per se but rather by their utilitarian function, an approach otherwise called a “pragmatic approach” or “utility accounting” (Kitzinger, 1987). A pragmatic approach would assess qualitative research findings based on its ability to achieve, for example, certain emancipatory goals or to promote social action (Sparkes, 2001). As a health researcher, I assessed my research

claims, however partial and situated, based on how well the knowledge generated from the final analysis could facilitate effective health promotion strategies or improve the provision of health services of those I had researched. Likewise for my Master's thesis that explored victimized gay men from abusive relationships, evaluation of my research was based on its ability to disrupt the violence, promote policy changes, and modify or create social services that better addressed the needs of victimized gay men.

A pragmatic approach, however, is not beyond scrutiny. "Promoting health" (or "emancipation") as a basis for research validity is treated as value-neutral and repositioned into the discursive function that "truth" or "reality" once occupied in the conventional assessment of validity. Meanwhile, social constructionist theorists particularly medical sociologists have long argued that "health" cannot be invoked as an impartial truth claim above and beyond the ideological and political (Freund & McGuire, 1999; Lupton, 1994; Nettleton, 1995). For example, medical science had once pathologized black slaves for attempting to escape their white masters (Ahmad, 1993). In this sense, "healthy" black men were once conceived as those who remained subordinated by white supremacist rule. Political resistance to that rule (e.g., black slaves fleeing white supremacy) was viewed as a form of sickness – drapetomania. "Health," like "truth" – and thus, validity – can be used as a means to maintain unequal social relations; and consequently, the social conditions that render black men "unhealthy." To say one is "promoting health" as a foundation for the assessment of validity leaves unexamined potentially problematic functions of "health." For this reason we need to assess and interrogate validity with an explicit focus on how it operates discursively within social science research.

New ways of conceptualizing validity have been theorized (e.g., Patton, 1999; Sparkes, 2001) and discussion of this type within qualitative methodology has grown exponentially. Of particular concern here are those attempts to reconceptualize validity within social constructionist/post-structural epistemologies that claim a radical divergence from their positivist predecessors. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, purportedly draw from epistemological assumptions associated with social constructionism and put forth a version of validity recast as "trustworthiness." However, Scheurich (1996) argues that even within these reconceptualizations "there must be a boundary line, a judgement criterion for deciding whose work is acceptable" (p. 51) and whose work is not. Constructed in this way, according to Scheurich, validity in whatever epistemological "guise" is assessed within an either/or framework (e.g., trustworthy/untrustworthy; valid/invalid) that serves to foreclose knowledge assessed as the latter within each binary opposition (e.g., untrustworthy, invalid). Thus, these reconceptualisations function no differently from their positivist incarnates and similarly serve to police the social science project (Scheurich, 1996) by de/legitimizing social knowledge, research practice, and experiential possibilities.

Although some qualitative researchers have embraced various forms of storytelling, such as fictional narratives (Richardson, 2000) and "research based drama" (Goodley & Moore, 2000) as practices of valid knowledge construction and representation, these alternatives are largely marginalized and overtly rejected by conventional – qualitative and quantitative – social scientists due to their lack of credibility (Goodley & Moore, 2000), objectivity, and rigour. As we reject our emotions and visceral sensations as possible sources of data advanced by some qualitative methodologists (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), likewise we relegate our dreams to the paranormal and their interpretations as pseudo-science.

However, both storytelling and the interpretation of dreams (and visions), however wild and fantastic, are considered valid sources of knowledge within many non-European (e.g., Native Canadian/American) ways of understanding the social world. In foreclosing these “ways of knowing,” validity – as conventionally practised – operates as an imperialist force colonizing non-Western knowledges as illegitimate. In this sense, validity is a practice of power, and in Foucauldian terms, a “regime of truth” (Lather, 1993). Validity precludes certain experiential possibilities and social knowledge and therefore, actively produces and demarcates the social world in the image of those who control the practice of validation.

It is for these reasons that “letting go of validity” (Sparkes, 2001) is problematic insofar as it propagates and instates a language that denies these practices of power and epistemic violence. Therefore, we must (re)conceive of a validity that works against the policing of the social sciences and one that does not put forth yet another regime of truth (Scheurich, 1996). We are in need of a validity that does not foreclose (i.e., within an either/or binary), but actively encourages interrogation of these practices of power. But, what are the risks of utilizing a form of validity from a social constructionist perspective?

It has been argued that without realist/neo-realist/critical-realist conceptions of validity “research descends into a bedlam where the only battles that are won are by those who shout the loudest” (Silverman as cited in Sparkes, 2001). In other words, a validity that endlessly defers foreclosure can actively promote political disaster and right wing conservatism. Recognizing these concerns and fully appreciating the debates within which they have developed, I argue that realist conceptions of validity (neo, critical, or otherwise) and their sometimes desperate appeals to “objectivity” or “truth” have not necessarily protected us from these consequences: As postmodernists rightly argue, the most heinous right-wing movements have been premised upon knowledge deemed “valid” even by research practices regarded as systematically rigorous and scientific.

I submit an initial effort to redeploy validity in ways that can address the concerns I present in this paper. In moving away from foreclosure through binary oppositions, we change our validity question from “Is this valid research?” to “What is this research valid for?” Implicit within this reformulation are the ideas that (a) validity is not a determination (i.e., “is valid” versus “is not valid”), but the process of interrogation and, (b) this interrogation necessitates multiple and sometimes contradictory readings of the functions any particular research representation (whether the research findings or the research project as a whole) can serve. Although there can be no conceptualisation of validity that precludes the practice of power (at least within a Foucauldian perspective), we must conceive of validity that actively negotiates these practices and makes them known.

Because they involve representational politics that advance a particular version or interpretation of the social world, research findings are envisioned here as “narratives” that are premised upon particular ontological and epistemological claims. These representations function in ways that not only describe, but actively construct and explain our social world(s). Borrowing from Lather's (1991) work in the fields of critical pedagogy and feminist postmodernism, I propose four interrelated functions that research representations or narratives can serve: A realist narrative functions to tell us “what is” and therefore, “what we should do” and assumes an objective world; a critical narrative foregrounds political structures that shape the social world within uneven social relations; a deconstructive narrative emphasizes the social construction of narratives, works against the production of

foreclosures, and encourages proliferation of possibilities; and finally, a reflexive narrative makes known the constitutive role of the researcher and the processes through which his/her reading is selected from an infinite number of possible readings.

If validity entails the process of identifying and interrogating the un/intended, variable, and contradictory functions across time and context in which any particular research representation can serve, then validity is endlessly deferred and always in need of negotiation. This method of assessment differs from a pragmatic approach insofar as it encourages continual (re)reading of its representational failures and successes (pragmatic or otherwise). In the following section, I attempt to apply this framework to a study I conducted exploring violence and abuse in gay male relationships.

The Application: Domestic Violence within Gay Male Relationships

For my Master's thesis, I conducted a number of interviews with gay men who self-identified as victims of gay male partner abuse. Briefly, these interviews explored the conditions within which these gay men entered into their abusive relationship, their experiences and identification of abuse, and the eventual termination of their relationship and subsequent "living and surviving after abuse." Their accounts were riddled experiences of with pain and suffering inflicted not only from their abusive partners but also from a heterosexist society that refused to acknowledge their victimisation. Nevertheless, their accounts also represented tales of perseverance and strength in the face of adversity. I understood the men's involvement with my study represented their overwhelming desire to help others.

A realist narrative. One of the key findings from these interviews focussed on the difficulties in naming gay male partner abuse. An overwhelming majority of the participants initially did not name their experiences of relationship violence as abuse because they did not know "what abuse is" or "what it looked like." It is for this reason that I produced "case studies" (Patton, 1990) of their experiences. These accounts served an explicit strategy to put a "face" on gay male partner abuse. The research findings thus functioned as a realist narrative that other gay men could use to evaluate and assess their own experiences of relationship violence; and to an extent, the narratives produced had accomplished that goal.

However, these narratives fell short as a representation that could account for abuse among gay men more generally. Although the interviewees believed themselves speaking from a universal position of "a victimized gay man," it was clear to me that their narratives reflected the experiences from a particular social location. For example, as the men came to the realisation, however slow, that their relationship experiences were abusive, they were free to devise whatever strategies necessary to leave their violent partners. These men were not financially dependent on their partners in ways that could have effectively prevented their escape. Their narratives of abuse spoke little about culturally inappropriate social services that many gay men of colour or new immigrants may have faced. This is not to suggest that the resulting narratives were somehow untrue, but that the representations of abuse I advanced in my research reflected a reality of some victimized gay men, but certainly not of all.

A critical narrative. The experiences of the gay men reflected in the research findings of my study occurred within a broader heterosexist context having a direct impact on the men's experiences in finding acceptable non-heterosexist health care services to

address their needs. By drawing attention to these political structures, the narratives I created functioned as a critical account, however, with only a narrow glimpse of one of a host of social structures that shaped the participants' experiences. Although heterosexist discourses (backed by institutional practices) effectively erased "domestic violence," "abuse," "rape," and so forth from their psychic imaginary, these men upon naming their experiences as abuse did not have to address issues of cultural and class barriers (as already discussed). Thus, these men enjoyed white middle class privileges often denied to people of colour and lower class gay men. By minimizing these multiple systems of privilege that had profound effects in shaping the men's experiences of abuse, the resulting representations when read as a realist narrative – stories that serve to tell us "how things really are" – functioned to normalize and take-for-granted the structures that afford white middle-class gay men their privilege.

A deconstructive narrative. Although the narratives of the gay men penetrated the dominant ideology that domestic violence is strictly a heterosexual phenomenon, the narratives, in their realist reading, did not allow for any interrogation of the construction of "abuse." In identifying "what is," the stories potentially foreclosed "what could be." All of the men I interviewed described their experiences of domestic violence within the very familiar terms consistent with those of battered heterosexual women: Upon meeting his abuser, the to-be victimized gay man was swept away by his partner's extraordinary charm. In time, his abuser would further isolate him from friends and family while subjecting him to increasing and persistent emotional and psychological abuse. Eventually, physical violence would ensue prompting the victim to make a critical decision, sometimes lasting several months, whether or not to leave the relationship.

I also realized how "relationships" within which "domestic violence" can occur were constructed along heteronormative terms: long-term, monogamous, and possibly cohabiting. In characterizing "gay male abuse" in this way, these narratives do not necessarily speak to the entirety of queer relationships that transcend such, some would say constraining, definitions of "relationships" (i.e., many gay male relationships, abusive or otherwise, are not long-term, monogamous, or cohabiting). Although it is clear that victims of same-sex partner abuse must narrate their experiences consistent with battered wives in order to make their abuse recognizable to others (Ristock, 2002), such efforts potentially conceal the needs of victimized gay men who do not neatly fit into heterosexualized relationship norms. By contrast, embracing an all-encompassing, far-reaching definition of "relationship" within which the term "domestic violence" can be applied commits another form of violence that potentially reduces its specificity and therefore, significance (Ristock, 1996, 1998).

A reflexive narrative. The case-studies, or narratives, actively foregrounded the voice of the participants and by necessity, concealed my own constitutive role in the production of the gay men's stories. However, these narratives were situated within the larger project of my study that clearly read, and was written, as my own personal narrative. Although confined within the writing conventions of the discipline of psychology (i.e., the familiar "literature review," "method," "research results" and "discussion" sections) that worked against my own reflexivity, I nonetheless made known my presence that came in the form of an active research voice within the thesis. I wrote the text in the first person to foreground my performance (and hence accountability) as the researcher. My voice did not only describe the research events that took place, but highlighted my own political and ideological beliefs that ultimately guided the research process. For example, foregrounding

heterosexism and homophobic social structures in the gay men's narrative tale was based on my own political convictions I held, which was exemplified by the amount of research and review I devoted to heterosexism at the onset of the thesis. Similarly, the absence of any discussion, for example, on race and class illustrated my own lack of awareness and as a result, normalized these social structures. The elision of these social structures was not so much a conscious decision as it was my inability at the time of the research to perceive and address these uneven social relations.

Conclusions or Delusions?

This paper is my initial attempt to address the issue of validity in qualitative research within a social constructionist perspective. Although mainly written as an evaluative tool to assess qualitative research through a social constructionist lens, the framework put forth here nonetheless leaves us with the question of method for practitioners. By way of conclusion, then, I will address the question of how we are to practice qualitative research. Of course, championing a recipe style format with a fixed set of research procedures along with a strict template for write-up is obviously contrary to the theoretical stance taken in this paper. This is not to suggest that all research procedures are necessarily equal across time and context, but that to position a particular qualitative method above all others is to commit "methodolatry" – a privileging of methods above all other research considerations (Chamberlain, 1999) and in particular, the narrative functions of the research claims being made.

Speaking to the rise of qualitative methods in the discipline of health psychology, Chamberlain (1999) argues that methodolatry marks a carry-over from the predominance of positivist methodological assumptions where rigid adherence to method functions as the justification for the research claims being made. Such methodolatry leads us to become (among other things) preoccupied with the "correct" or "proper methods" and avoid theoretical, and in particular critical, implications of the research we do. Instead, Chamberlain suggests some guiding principles that qualitative researchers might keep in mind as they conduct their practice.

Deciding on the epistemology (e.g., constructionist) prior to selecting the theoretical perspective (e.g., phenomenology or feminism) prior to choosing the methodology (e.g., grounded theory) and then the specific methods (e.g., focus groups) puts methodology and methods firmly in their place. (Chamberlain, 1999, p. 295)

The point made here is that qualitative researchers should not be constrained within a "methodological straightjacket" and must be allowed to utilize whatever methods necessary to explore the social phenomenon under consideration. However, it is not just the choices, but the reasons for those choices (and the researcher's theoretical interests that are secured by those choices) that need to be made explicit and held up to scrutiny. This demands a certain degree of reflexivity from researchers. Journal editors, manuscript reviewers, and teachers of qualitative methodology may well encourage (and readers should well expect) more explicit researcher accounts of ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments within research write-ups. This type of reflexivity is crucial if social constructionist

researchers are to address their own construction of the world and hence, their own practice of power. In this article, I reconceptualize validity as a process that actively promotes critical reading and rereading of any given research representation. In this sense, the process of validation is arguably “democratized” by the proliferation of readings emerging from researchers, participants, and readers. The goal of validation is not to determine, once and for all, if a representation serves a particular function, but rather to discover and anticipate how it “does,” “can,” or “might,” function to incite and foreclose, emancipate and oppress, and so forth when applied to different times and contexts and evaluated from different social locations. Although it becomes apparent that this conception of validity does not necessarily prevent dubious or politically problematic research claims from making their way onto the table, neither do conventional conceptions of validity. The relative merits of the proposed validity allow for the possibility that these questionable research claims can be named and interrogated as “dubious” and “politically problematic” and thus, encourage alternatives; whereas, previously, such claims could have slipped silently and quietly into the realm of “valid knowledge.”

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Author's Citation

Aguinaldo, J. P. (2004). Rethinking validity in qualitative research from a social constructionist perspective: From "is this valid research?" to "what is this research valid for?" *The Qualitative Report*, 9(1), 127-136 Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR9-1/aguinaldo.pdf>
